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Costa Rica's Return to Neutrality Strains Its Ties With Washington

By JAMES LeMOYNE

HISTORICALLY the best of friends with the United States, Costa Rica has been sharply at odds with the Reagan Administration of late. Determined to reassert his country's cherished neutrality, President Oscar Arias Sánchez of Costa Rica appears to have rubbed powerful hard-liners the wrong way.

Administration officials have clashed with Costa Rica most sharply over how to deal with Nicaragua. Costa Rica wants to emphasize political rather than military pressure on the Sandinista Government and, to Washington's dismay, has publicly called for ending aid to the rebel guerrillas. The dust still has not settled in this test of wills, but the Costa Ricans seem to be holding their own.

The Arias Government has arrested contra commanders, closed contra bases and sealed a secret airstrip built under the supervision of associates of Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North, the White House aide who was dismissed in the Iran-contra scandals. Last month, the Costa Ricans proposed a regional peace plan that would cut off aid to the contras in return for political liberalization in Nicaragua.

President Daniel Ortega Saavedra of Nicaragua said last week that the plan was constructive but indicated that Nicaragua may propose modifications. Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams has welcomed the plan as "promising," but Costa Rican and American officials said Mr. Abrams had told the Costa Ricans that it did not make sufficient demands on the Sandinista Government. The Senate endorsed the plan, 97 to 1.

"There are now discrepancies between the policies of Costa Rica and of the United States toward Central America," President Arias said in an interview last week.

The differences have become embarrassingly evident. Both the American Ambassador and the C.I.A. station chief in San José left under a cloud earlier this year, after revelations that they had secretly aided the Nicaraguan rebels, or contras, in violation of promises to Costa Rica.

"It has been amazing to watch this," said a Costa Rican senior official. "We are allies, but we wonder how they could be so stupid, so arrogant." Relations became especially testy in early September when the Costa Ricans insisted on closing the secret airstrip built and managed by associates of Colonel North last year, with the knowledge of the United States Ambassador, Lewis Tambs, and Mr. Abrams.

A memo from Colonel North's files published by the Tower Commission in its report on the Iran-contra affair seems to indicate that the former White House aide, Mr. Tambs and Mr. Abrams had talked of threatening Costa Rica with a cutoff of American economic aid if the Costa Ricans were to reveal the existence of the airstrip. Mr. Arias and Mr. Abrams have denied that any such threat was made, but strong doubts remain, Costa Rican officials say.

Ambassador Tambs telephoned Mr. Arias at 2 o'clock one morning in September to "discuss the airstrip," according to a Costa Rican official. Mr. Tambs has declined to comment. Although Mr. Arias denied that there had been overt American pressure, other Costa Rican officials said Mr. Arias's visit to Washington in December had been held up, at least partly because of the dispute, and there had been a long delay before \$40 million of United States economic aid was released. Two Western diplomats added that when Costa Rican officials closed the secret airstrip, they encountered and detained a handful of contra rebels and a contract agent

for the Central Intelligence Agency, who was later released at the urging of the American Embassy. Mr. Arias said he "knew nothing" about the reported incident.

However, Mr. Arias later refused to meet secretly with William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence, who visited Costa Rica on a damage control mission in October, according to diplomats and Costa Rican officials. An American Embassy spokesman declined to comment. "He told the Americans that he was willing to meet Mr. Casey pub-

licly but not in secret," a Costa Rican official said. Mr. Casey turned down the offer.

Today's chill is a far cry from the close relationship the Reagan Administration had with the former Costa Rican Government of President Luis Alberto Monge. Costa Rican officials and Western diplomats said Mr. Monge permitted the C.I.A. and the contras to operate in Costa Rica, virtually unfettered — although Costa Rica was always a secondary front in the rebel war, which was mainly directed from Honduras. In 1984 and early 1985, informed Costa Ricans and Western diplomats say, the former C.I.A. station chief, who went by the name of Tomás Castillo, was considered to be the man really in charge of the United States Embassy and responsible for a far-flung range of activities.

Some Costa Rican officials and Western diplomats contend that the C.I.A. established what amounted to a private channel to Costa Rican police and intelligence officials. The American Embassy pushed for the appointment of Benjamin Piza, who was highly sympathetic to the contra cause, as Public Security Minister in the Monge Government two years ago, Costa Rican officials say. Mr. Piza was rewarded with a trip to the White House to meet Ronald Reagan, accompanied by the C.I.A. station chief, the officials added.

Such doings appear to pain the present Government. When he took office 10 months ago, President Arias said Costa Rica, a country that abolished its army in 1948 and has since enjoyed stable democracy, was "a welfare state, not a garrison state." He and other senior officials go out of their way to say that they want close and friendly, but respectful, relations with the United States.

Costa Rican officials and many West European diplomats in Central America say they hope the new Costa Rican peace plan can provide a face-saving way for Washington to step away from the contras and a policy that has strained ties with Costa Rica. But few officials in San José appear to be confident that an entente cordiale with the Reagan Administration will be achieved soon.

